



4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405
(406) 454-5840

September 25, 2017

Dear Interested Party:

This letter serves as notification that Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) has made a decision regarding the proposed renewal of two grazing lease agreement renewals on the Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area (WMA). Public comments were accepted August 23 through September 13 and subsequently 5 public comments were received. After reviewing the Draft environmental assessment (EA) with respect to public comment, it is FWP's conclusion that the impacts associated with the proposed action would not have a significant impact on the physical or human environment in the area. The Draft EA is the appropriate level of analysis for the proposed action and an environmental impact statement is not required. A summary of the public comments and FWP response to those comments is included within the Decision Notice.

It is my recommendation to move forward with the two proposed grazing lease agreement renewals on the Ear Mountain WMA. Based on public comment, modifications to the Draft EA have been made and along with this Decision Notice, both documents are considered Final. The 960-acre and 2,120-acre grazing lease agreements will allow cattle to be utilized as a habitat management tool as described in the Draft EA.

The Fish and Wildlife Commission will be asked to approve these grazing agreement renewals at the Commission meeting on October 12, 2017. Copies of the Decision Notice and Final EA will be available on the FWP website at <http://fwp.mt.gov/home/publiccomments> (click on "Fish & Wildlife" and then on "Acquisitions, Trades and Leases").

Thank you for your interest and involvement.

Sincerely,

Gary Bertellotti
Region 4 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405
(406) 454-5840



**DECISION NOTICE FOR THE DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT:
EAR MOUNTAIN WMA GRAZING LEASE AGREEMENT RENEWALS – GOLLEHON AND SALMOND RANCHES**

Region 4 Headquarters
4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to renew two grazing lease agreements for a two-year rest/rotation grazing cycle on the WMA. The proposed grazing leases would allow cattle to be utilized as a management tool to remove residual vegetation and maintain vegetative condition, providing availability and quality of native forage, benefiting wildlife on the WMA. The WMA has been grazed with a rest-rotation grazing system since 1991.

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT AND PUBLIC REVIEW PROCESS

Fish, Wildlife & Parks is required to assess impacts to the human and physical environment under the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). The Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area grazing lease agreement renewal proposal and its effects were documented by FWP in an Environmental Assessment (EA) and comment was accepted from August 23rd through September 13. Public notice of the Draft EA and proposed action was submitted to 3 local newspapers, one statewide press release, on the FWP website and to adjacent landowners to Ear Mountain WMA. Hard copies of the Draft EA were also available at the FWP Region 4 offices in Great Falls and Fairfield, and were also available via mail/email request.

ALTERNATIVE TO PROPOSED ACTION:

Alternative A: No Action

Fish, Wildlife & Parks would not utilize the proposed grazing management plan on the WMA. Over time, forage quality (palatability) for some wildlife species (e.g., big game – mule deer & bighorn sheep) species would decline. The lessee's would be required to find additional grazing pasture elsewhere. The lessee's would not be required to allow public hunting access on their properties.

Ear Mountain WMA would continue to be managed for the benefit of wildlife and public access. Current services and maintenance of the WMA would continue. No impacts to the environment or human resources would be expected to occur as a result of cattle presence since grazing would not occur.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Fish, Wildlife & Parks would implement the described 2-year rest/rotation grazing cycle on the WMA. The establishment and maintenance of the proposed grazing plan would continue to use cattle grazing

as a management tool to maintain plant productivity by stimulating regrowth and palatability of native grasses and forbs for the benefit of wildlife. The lessee(s) would benefit from the availability of additional early and late summer pasture for their cattle. The proposed action would promote and continue good relations with local ranchers/neighbors. Public hunting opportunity would be allowed through the Salmond and Gollehon properties via permission only and on a first come, first serve basis.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

During the 23 day comment period, five (5) public comments were received. Three comments were in favor of the proposed action, 1 commented on further defining minimum hunter use on the lessee's properties and one comment had several concerns, primarily related to potential effects on historical or cultural resources.

RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMMENT

Please see below with regard to pertinent comments and FWP response to those comments that noted some level of concern or question with respect to the Proposed Action. A list of all public comments is attached in Appendix A.

Comment #1: The grazing lease(s) should only be given to livestock owners who allow public access to their private property for 250 hunter days per year or more. This should be a condition of the lease.

FWP Response: As is noted in the EA, lessees would be required to allow public hunting with permission on their adjacent properties for the duration of the lease agreement. Public access to portions of their properties at certain times of the year could be denied due to the presence of livestock or other ranch activities that might inhibit normal ranching operations. The lessees would regulate hunter numbers and timing and distribution of hunters on a first come, first served basis. Hunting would be allowed by permission only.

However, we also recognize that setting a minimum number of hunter days would help better define what level of hunter opportunity is expected or tolerated. If the F&W Commission approves these lease agreements, FWP will work with each lessee to better define within each specific lease agreement appropriate levels of hunter use on their property.

Comment #2: The EA failed to acknowledge or discuss the bears which inhabit the WMA...potential serious hazard to both livestock and people.

FWP Response: The Draft EA does discuss bear presence on the WMA in Part II, 5h. This section focused on grizzly bears only, although the Final EA does also include black bears in this discussion. Both lessee's live and ranch in prime bear habitat so are well accustomed to managing and minimizing potential impacts to their livestock. No additional human/bear conflicts are expected (or are known to have occurred over the last 26 years) on the WMA due to livestock presence.

Comment #3: The EA failed to acknowledge or discuss potential effects with respect to the area being a traditional use area, traditional cultural property, holding sacred sites, or further consultation with MT State Historical Preservation Office (SHPO), Metis, Blackfeet, BLM or the Nature Conservancy.

FWP Response: This comment is correct in that potential effects on specific cultural or historical resources were not discussed in any detail in the Draft EA. Part II, Section 12 (Cultural/Historical Resources) of the EA is the best section to address these potential concerns and has been corrected in the Final EA. It is worth noting that within the *EA Report for Development on the Ear Mountain Game Range (MT FWP, project number: W-124-D)* when the WMA was initially purchased in 1976, “No historic sites are known to exist on the property. Archeological sites may be present in light of the use of the Rocky Mountain foot hills as a hunting ground by native Americans, however to date no sites have been located.”

In any case and in summary, FWP believes the proposed action would not have significant impact to any potential cultural or historic resources. As is explained within the Draft EA, prior to acquisition from FWP in 1976, livestock grazing on the land was the length of the growing season, continuous from year to year. Once purchased by FWP, the WMA was not used as livestock (cattle) grazing pasture from 1976-1991 in order to allow vegetation reestablishment due to significant utilization prior to acquisition. Since 1991, a limited rest-rotation cattle grazing system has been in place. Native large mammal grazing (mule and white-tailed deer, elk, bighorn sheep, presumably bison) has consistently occurred before and in concurrence (except bison) with more recent livestock presence. Fish, Wildlife and Parks is using grazing in a manner that is sustainable to the native vegetation and does not provide substantial impacts to wildlife, soils or water. The proposed action does not involve any new construction, excavation, or other ground disturbance and therefore does not impact any existing potential cultural resources.

Additionally, renewing a grazing lease such as is described (does not involve any substantial ground disturbance) does not require a cultural resource review. In consultation with SHPO, FWP has adopted rules under MCA 22-3-424 (1) for the “preservation of heritage properties and paleontological remains on lands owned by the state to avoid, whenever feasible, state actions or state assisted or licensed actions that substantially alter heritage properties or paleontological remains on lands owned by the state and avoid, whenever feasible, state actions or state assisted or licensed actions that substantially alter the properties...”. FWP’s cultural resource policy, ARM 12.8.503, requires that the department initiate “reviews and studies required by this part prior to initiating any undertaking which may result in changes to the surface structures, or other character of the land.”

Per the earlier statements, a grazing lease or grazing in general does not substantially alter heritage properties (MCA) nor does it change surface structures or the character of the land (ARM). We also believe in terms of other cultural concerns, our leasing activities on Ear Mountain WMA do not have a significant negative impact on the land (e.g., we are not restricting public uses of the property, be they recreation or cultural). In fact, as has been stated, utilizing livestock grazing is intended to be a management tool to remove residual vegetation and maintain vegetative condition, providing availability and quality of native forage, benefiting native wildlife on the WMA.

MODIFICATIONS TO ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS AND MANAGEMENT PLAN

With respect to public comment received, necessary modifications to the Draft EA were completed when finalizing the document.

DECISION NOTICE

Utilizing the Environmental Analysis and public comment, a decision must be rendered by FWP that addresses the interests and issues identified for this proposed action. Fish, Wildlife & Park’s analysis supports the agricultural grazing leases on Ear Mountain WMA as proposed. I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I

conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required. **It is my decision to accept the revised EA as supplemented by this Decision Notice as final, and to recommend the implementation of the agricultural grazing leases for Ear Mountain WMA with Gollehon and Salmond Ranches for a 2-year period.**

Copies of the Decision Notice and Final EA will be available on the FWP website at <http://fwp.mt.gov/home/publiccomments> (click on "Fish & Wildlife" and then on "Acquisitions, Trades and Leases"). Additional copies are also available upon request from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Freezout Lake Office, Attn: Brent Lonner, PO Box 488, Fairfield, MT 59436; (406)467-2488; Or emailing to blonner@mt.gov

Signed,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gary Bertellotti". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Gary" being more prominent than the last name "Bertellotti".

Gary Bertellotti
Region 4 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405
(406) 454-5840

Appendix A.

Comment 1 –

"I think it is a good idea to continue the grazing permits as long aa the rest rotation process is kept in place"

Comment 2 –

"The grazing lease(s) should only be given to livestock owners who allow public access to their private property for 250 hunter days per year or more. This should be a condition of the lease."

Comment 3 –

"I believe it should be grazed. It is good for the land if not over grazed. That is a short and sweet comment but its a fact!"

Comment 4 –

"I am in favor of using grazing to maintain healthy forage for wildlife and cattle on the subject WMA. It also reduces the likelihood of uncontrollable wildfires. I am a member of the East Slope Back Country Horsemen and I use our public lands a great deal, including the Ear Mountain area."

Comment 5 –



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P.O. Box 2186, Cody WY 82414

Gary Bertellotti
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 4 Supervisor
Great Falls, MT

RE: Ear Mtn. WMA Grazing EA Comments
Email comments sent to: blonner@mt.gov

Dear Mr. Bertellotti;

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments concerning Grazing Leases on the Ear Mountain WMA.

Having worked in the area for a number of years I believe I have an excellent knowledge of the area and suitable information upon which to base my comments. While I have no overwhelming objections to grazing in the WMA I do believe there are a number of notable errors/omissions in the EA that must be addressed before renewing, modifying, or cancelling the leases.

The following are a number of concerns that in my opinion should be addressed before proceeding.

1. An updated EA should be analyzed and let out for comment before any final decision.
2. The EA failed to acknowledge or discuss the bears which inhabit the WMA. I can tell you from personal experience they are present, do forage in the area, and are a potential serious hazard to both livestock and people.
3. The EA failed to acknowledge or discuss that the area is a Traditional Use Area and a Traditional Cultural Property for the Metis and Blackfeet.

4. The EA failed to acknowledge or discuss that the area contains important cultural and historic resources, aka Historic Properties, as well as "Sacred Sites".

5. The EA failed to acknowledge or discuss or mention any consultation with SHPO, Metis, Blackfeet, or any other Tribes.

6. The EA failed to acknowledge or discuss any analysis of Metis, Blackfeet, or other tribal concerns.

7. The EA failed to acknowledge or discuss or mention any consultation with BLM, Nature Conservancy, or others, particularly the Metis and Blackfeet, on direct or indirect effects.

8. The EA failed to acknowledge or discuss or mention any discussion of the effects of cattle on Traditional Use Area, Traditional Cultural Property, and Historic and Prehistoric Cultural Resources.

9. Ear Mountain is considered a Traditional Cultural Property by the Metis and Blackfeet and both direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to the area should be analyzed. It should be noted that the Area is directly associated with a notable Blackfoot Icon, Heavy Runner.


10. I would also direct your attention to a number of Metis and Blackfoot Sacred Sites in or near the area in question that may be affected by the proposed action. Information concerning these places can only be obtained from the affected Metis and Blackfeet.

As part of an amended EA I would suggest FWP contact and consider a Metis Historian and Elder, Al Wiseman, and Blackfeet Elders, identified by the Tribe (all of the elders may not reside in Montana) to obtain their counsel.

In the present form I believe the EA is seriously flawed and should be redone before a final decision is made.

I thank you for the opportunity to provide comments.

If you have questions, comments or concerns please do not hesitate to contact me at your earliest opportunity by Email or by cell at 307-899-0132.


James E. Chase, PhD
Mettler and Associates, Inc.



Final Environmental Assessment

Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area Grazing Lease Agreement – Salmond and Gollehon Ranches

PART I. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION

1. Type of proposed state action:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) Region 4 proposes to renew a rest-rotation grazing system for cattle on Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area (WMA). Since 1991, Ear Mountain WMA (3,080 acres) is divided into two pastures (north and south – Figure 1) with two different lessees, which have been permitted to graze cattle in accordance with grazing lease stipulations. The proposed action would continue previous grazing lease terms and conditions for a two-year period. The proposed action would continue to work under the primary objective of utilizing limited grazing as a management tool to enhance the quality of native forage for wildlife that inhabit the WMA.

2. Agency authority for the proposed action:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks will be the agency authority for the proposed action. Under Section 87-1-210 of the Montana Code Annotated (MCA) authorizes FWP to protect, enhance, and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future. Fish, Wildlife & Parks lease-out policy also requires an Environmental Analysis (EA) to be written for all new agricultural leases, lease extensions, or lease renewals (MCA, 89-1-209). Lastly, in accordance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act, FWP is required to assess the impacts that any proposal or project might have on the natural and human environments.

3. Name of project:

Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area Grazing Agreement Lease.

4. Anticipated Schedule:

Public Comment Period:	August 23 – September 13, 2017
Decision Notice:	Late September, 2017
Fish & Wildlife Commission:	Final Consideration: October 12, 2017
Leases Begins:	June 1, 2018 (South Pasture); August 1, 2018 (North Pasture)
Leases End:	December 31, 2019
Term of each Lease:	2 years

Grazing Schedule: South Pasture – June 1-30, 2018; August 1-31, 2019;
North Pasture – August 1-31, 2018; Rest – 2019

5. Location affected by proposed action (county, range and township):

The proposed project is located on the Ear Mountain WMA within Teton County, approximately 20 miles west of Choteau. The proposed grazing lease agreements divides the WMA into two pastures (North pasture – 960 acres; South pasture – 2,120 acres) and have been in place since 1991 (South Pasture) and 1992 (North Pasture). Legal descriptions of each pasture are as follows:

Table 1. Legal Description - North Pasture (960 Acres)

Teton County	
Township, Range	Section
T 24N, R 8W	S 4: SW1/4SE1/4; S1/2SW1/4
T 24N, R 8W	S 5: SE1/4SW1/4; S1/2SE1/4
T 24N, R 8W	S 8: E1/2NW1/4; NE1/4; N1/2SE1/4; SE1/4SE1/4 and portions north of the existing fence line in SW1/4SE1/4, SE1/4SW1/4 and NE1/4SW1/4
T 24N, R 8W	S 9: W1/2

Table 2. Legal Description - South Pasture (2,120 Acres)

Teton County	
Township, Range	Section
T 24N, R 8W	S 7: Lot 3 (NW ¼ SW ¼), Lot 4 (SW ¼ SW ¼), E ½ SW ¼, SE ¼
T 24N, R 8W	S 8: That portion that lies south of the existing fence line between the NW corner of government lot 1 in section 17 and the SE corner of the SW ¼ NW ¼ of said section 8.
T 24N, R 8W	S 17: Lot 1 (NE ¼ NE ¼), Lot 2 (SE ¼ NE ¼), Lot 3 (NE ¼ SE ¼), Lot 4 (SE ¼ SE ¼), W ½ E ½, W ½
T 24N, R 8W	S 18: E ½, E ½ NW ¼
T 24N, R 8W	S 19: E ½ NE ¼, NE ¼ SE ¼
T 24N, R 8W	S 20: Lot 1 (NE ¼ NE ¼), Lot 2 (NW ¼ NE ¼), Lot 3 (NE ¼ NW ¼), Lot 4 (SE ¼ NW ¼), Lot 5 (SW ¼ NE ¼), Lot 6 (SE ¼ NE ¼), Lot 7 (NE ¼ SW ¼), Lot 8 (SE ¼ SW ¼), W ½ W ½

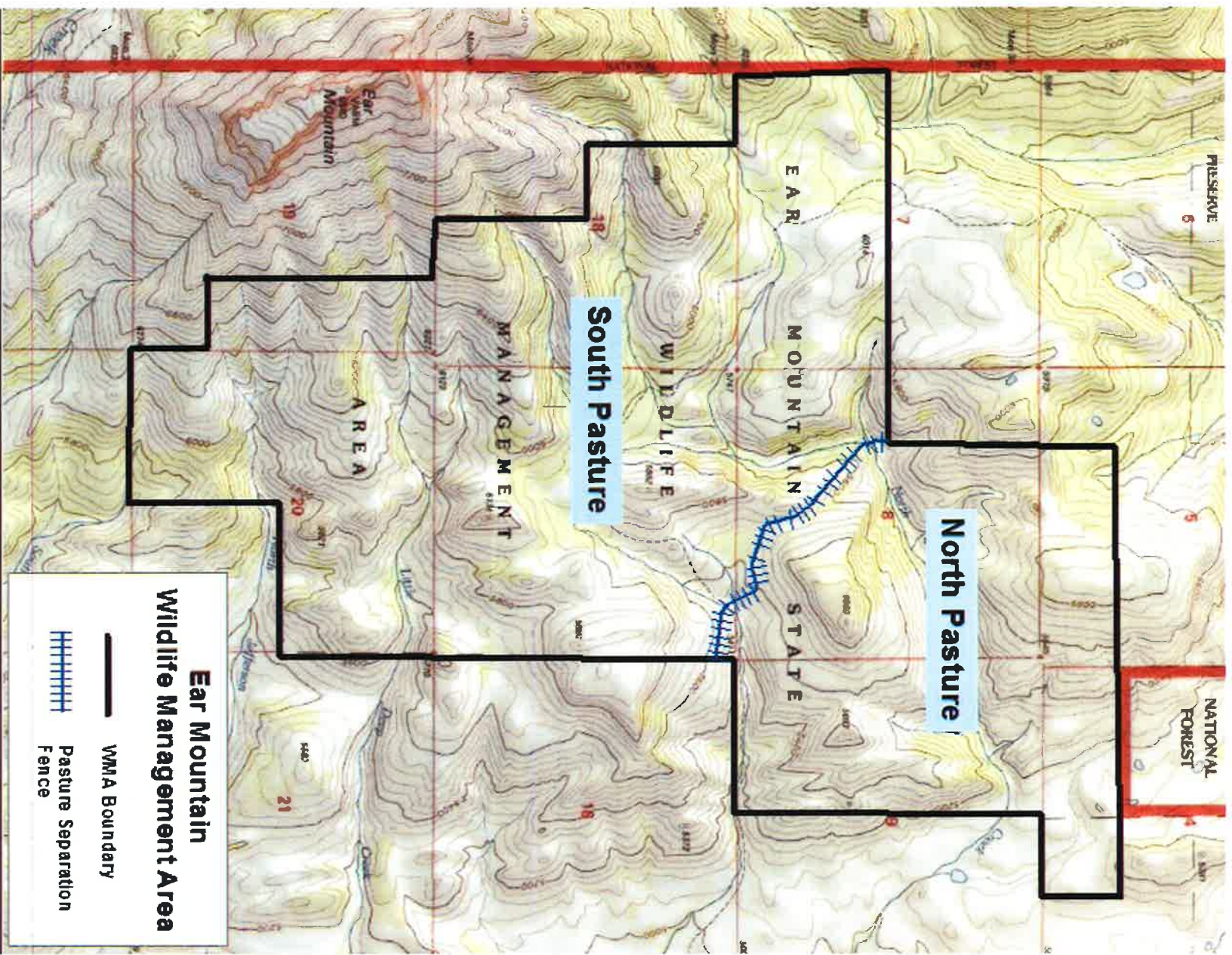


Figure 1. Ear Mountain WMA and associated grazing pastures.

6. **Project size -- *estimate* the number of acres that would be directly affected that are currently:**

	<u>Acres</u>		<u>Acres</u>
(a) Developed:		(d) Floodplain	0
Residential	0		
Industrial	0	(e) Productive:	
(existing shop area)		Irrigated cropland	0
(b) Open Space/		Dry cropland	0
Woodlands/Recreation	0	Forestry	930
(c) Wetlands/Riparian		Rangeland*	1730
Areas	90	Other	310

*includes shrubland, steppe, savannah and grassland habitat types

7. **Listing of any other Local, State or Federal agency that has overlapping or additional jurisdiction.**

(a) **Permits:** None required

(b) **Funding:**

Fencing – As part of the agreement, routine fence maintenance will be carried out by the lessee's and FWP personnel. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will provide materials for fence repairs. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will pay lessees at the hourly rate of \$10.00 for time spent on fence maintenance. When the grazing rental payment is due from the lessee to FWP, the total cost of maintenance through each lessee (number of hours worked as well as any necessary materials provided) will be subtracted from the payment. Fence maintenance costs through the lessee will not exceed \$500.00. The lessee will provide written documentation of maintenance performed to include date(s), hours worked, work description and location. Fish, Wildlife & Parks does not anticipate significant fence maintenance since most existing fences on the WMA are in good condition.

Rental Payment – The FWP standard grazing rate (cost/animal unit month - AUM) will be based upon the average annual grazing fees for Montana as reported by the National Agriculture Statistics Service in their annual report. For reference, the 2017 FWP standard grazing rate was \$24.00/AUM.

(c) **Other Overlapping or Additional Jurisdictional Responsibilities:** None

8. **Narrative summary of the proposed action or project including the benefits and purpose of the proposed action:**

Location and Brief Habitat Description:

Lying along the east slope of the Rocky Mountain Front, Ear Mtn. WMA was purchased in 1976 by the Fish, Wildlife & Parks (Fish and Game at the time) to provide public access to adjacent Federal lands, but also to set aside winter range for mule deer and bighorn sheep (among other wildlife).

The WMA is very diverse topographically (Figure 1). Much of the landform consists of steep slopes. Sparsely timbered slopes with patches of limber pine (*Pinus flexilis*) characterize the eastern edge of the WMA. Dense stands of lodgepole pine (*Pinus Contorta*) and Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) are interspersed with parks across the western half of the WMA. Clones of aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) occur along the margins of perennial streams and their tributaries. A variety of shrubs are dispersed throughout the open and forested rangeland types, while dense timbered habitat along with steep shale slopes (below Ear Mountain) is located in the western portion of the WMA. A wildlife fire in September, 2000 burned approximately 400 acres on the north end of the WMA.

The climax grassland type is rough fescue (*Festuca scabrella*). Other frequently occurring native grasses include Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*), bluebunch wheatgrass (*Agropyron spicatum*), and June grass (*Koeleria macrantha*). Other nonnative grasses are present on the WMA. *Balsamorhiza*, *Flox*, *Polygonum*, pasque flower, *Geranium*, *Antennaria*, and other forbs common to the Rocky Mountain Front are abundant on the WMA.

Past and Present Grazing Summary:

The WMA is managed for productive, diverse plant communities that will provide the quality forage and cover for native wildlife species, with emphasis on spring, fall and winter range habitat for mule deer and bighorn sheep. Over the last several years, utilizing a three-year rest/rotation grazing cycle as a management tool was directed at helping to maintain the vigor of vegetation on the WMA for the benefit of wildlife. Limited rest/rotation grazing on the WMA also provides local opportunity for ranch operators for good quality cattle grazing pasture. Year-round and seasonal forage for mule deer and bighorn sheep and other big game has been maintained.

Prior to acquisition from FWP in 1976, livestock grazing on the land was the length of the growing season, continuous from year to year. From 1976-1991, the WMA was not used as livestock (cattle) grazing pasture to allow vegetation reestablishment due to significant utilization prior to acquisition. In 1991, a rest-rotation grazing system was established for the 2,120-acre south pasture in order to address several sites on the WMA that portrayed limited vegetative cover due to wind and erosion along with accumulation of decadent material for bunchgrass species such as rough fescue (*Festuca scabrella*) (FWP, 1995). The intent of the grazing system was to increase vegetative cover while improving the vigor and production of bunchgrass stands on the area (FWP, 1995). Due to the same concerns, a grazing system was established for the 960-acre north pasture in 1992.

Both pastures have continued to follow a rest-rotation pattern to a varying degree with the adoption of the most current system coming from an evaluation of the system and vegetation in 1999 and 2000 (Frisina and Kujala, 1999; Frisina and Kujala, 2001). This system prescribed to

grazing one month before seed ripe the first year (June), one month after seed ripe the following year (August) and a year of complete rest the third year. Based on Frisina and Kujala's findings (1999, 2001) and in order to reduce browsing intensity, browsing frequency, and increase the frequency of season-long rest treatments, cattle stocking rates were reduced beginning in 2000 for the south pasture from a maximum of 650 to 391 AUM's per one-month grazing period. Since this time, average actual use on this Pasture is approximately 340 AUMs per period of use (range of 200 to 391 AUM's). The north pasture stocking rate was reduced from a maximum stocking rate of 260 AUM's (average = 219 AUM's) to a maximum of 70 AUM's beginning in 2001 for each one-month grazing period. Since this time, this pasture has typically seen maximum AUM use during each period of use. Both of the latter stocking rates have remained at this level since this time. The higher maximum annual AUM potential for the South pasture compared to the North pasture is in large part due to the higher available of primary and secondary range. For further information on the Frisina and Kujala documents (1999, 2001) or to request a copy of these documents refer to Part V. (EA Preparation) of this EA.

Based on the most recent more dedicated vegetation monitoring surveys, photo points (Appendix C), and other qualitative observations, browse plants continue to show overall fair to good growth depending on the location. Monitored aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) within the South pasture are showing signs of heavy browse in places. Grazing levels (AUMs) in this pasture are likely at a maximum with respect to long term sustainability and impacts to vegetation. Some plants (minority) are displaying arrested architectures when considering the height of the current year's growth (at the base) vs. top of the current year's growth. However, most plants are not being browsed to the point of being in the arrested phase, but with a long time, are able to grow through the browse zone.

For the North pasture, the primary area of some concern with respect to browse impacts is located in the lower North Fork of Willow creek near the east boundary of the WMA. Observations show some chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*) in this immediate area to be in the arrested phase due to browse pressure. It is important to note that this area constitutes a small percentage (<5%) of the entire pasture. This is typically more of a concern in the late summer grazing period than the early period. Cattle tend to disperse better in the early period due to better grass (green) and cooler weather conditions. For Cottonwood in this area, although the plants are seeing some browse impact, they are able to grow above the browse zone. There also continues to be less than desired utilization of grass in the more upland grass zones of this pasture. Most notable is the large area north of the NF Willow creek drainage. Overall, bunchgrasses are in healthy condition (robust plants portraying true bunchgrass stature), however residual vegetation (grass) is quite prevalent throughout the area.

In order to address these concerns long term, the Proposed Action is being recommended at this time. This action would commit to a two-year lease with respect to the current treatment rotation for each pasture. During this time, potential grazing system modifications and improvements will be evaluated. The primary intent of these potential changes would be to help improve the productivity or availability and nutritional value of the more upland grass zone, with perhaps most emphasis on portions of the North pasture. Ongoing evaluation of the South pasture and browse impacts would also be completed and discussed.

Beginning in 2018 and with respect to the previous grazing treatment rotation, the South pasture would be scheduled to be grazed June 1 – June 30 at not more than 391 AUMs and the

North pasture from August 1 – August 31 at not more than 70 AUMs. For 2019, the South pasture would be grazed August 1 – August 31 and the North pasture would be completely rested. The FWP standard grazing rate (cost/animal unit month) will be based on the average annual grazing fees for Montana as reported by the National Agricultural Statistics Survey (NASS) for Montana in their annual report. The proposed grazing plan for each pasture would be effective for two years, with contract renewal and/or modifications contingent on future management goals on WMA. See Appendix A and B for further information on the proposed grazing plan.

As part of the proposed action, the lessees would allow public hunting with permission on their properties for the duration of the lease agreement. Public access to portions of their properties at certain times of the year could be denied due to the presence of livestock or other ranch activities that might inhibit normal ranching operations. Fish, Wildlife and Parks would plan to work with the lessee's to better define within each specific lease agreement appropriate levels of hunter use on their property. The lessees would regulate hunter numbers and timing and distribution of hunters on a first come, first served basis. Hunting would be allowed by permission only.

9. Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives (including the no action alternative) to the proposed action whenever alternatives are reasonably available and prudent to consider and a discussion of how the alternatives would be implemented:

Alternative A: No Action

Fish, Wildlife & Parks would not utilize the proposed grazing management plan on the WMA. Over time, forage quality (palatability) for some wildlife species (i.e., big game – mule deer & bighorn sheep) species would decline. The lessee's would be required to find additional grazing pasture elsewhere. The lessee's would not be required to allow public hunting access on their properties.

If the No Action alternative is chosen, FWP would continue to manage Ear Mtn. WMA for the benefit of wildlife and public access. Current services and maintenance of the WMA would continue. No impacts to the environment or human resources would be expected to occur as a result of cattle presence since grazing would not occur.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Fish, Wildlife & Parks would implement the described 2-year rest/rotation grazing cycle on the WMA. The establishment and maintenance of the proposed grazing plan would continue to use cattle grazing as a management tool to maintain plant productivity by stimulating regrowth and palatability of native grasses and forbs for the benefit of wildlife. The lessee(s) would benefit from the availability of additional early and late summer pasture for their cattle. The proposed action would promote and continue good relations with local ranchers/neighbors. Some segments of the public may disapprove of cattle grazing on the WMA. Public hunting opportunity would be allowed through the Salmond and Gollehon properties via permission only and on a first come, first serve basis.

PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW CHECKLIST

1. Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment.

A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. <u>LAND RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. **Soil instability or changes in geologic substructure?			X		No	1a
b. Disruption, displacement, erosion, compaction, moisture loss, or over-covering of soil, which would reduce productivity or fertility?			X		No	1b
c. **Destruction, covering or modification of any unique geologic or physical features?		X				
d. Changes in siltation, deposition or erosion patterns that may modify the channel of a river or stream or the bed or shore of a lake?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to earthquakes, landslides, ground failure, or other natural hazard?		X				
f. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Land Resources (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

1a and 1b. Cattle usage (up to 461 total AUM's/year) and the short grazing period will cause some measurable damage primarily where cattle develop trail systems and concentrate around water. Stocking levels prescribed in the proposed action are substantially reduced from historic levels which have helped minimize damage.

* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

*** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

**** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

2. <u>AIR</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. **Emission of air pollutants or deterioration of ambient air quality? (Also see 13 (c).)		X				
b. Creation of objectionable odors?			X		No	2a
c. Alteration of air movement, moisture, or temperature patterns or any change in climate, either locally or regionally?		X				
d. Adverse effects on vegetation, including crops, due to increased emissions of pollutants?		X				
e. *** <u>For P-R/D-J projects</u> , will the project result in any discharge, which will conflict with federal or state air quality regs? (Also see 2a.)		X				
f. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Air Resources (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

2a. The proposed action would have no effect on the ambient air quality, however, some individuals may find the smell of livestock grazing on the WMA objectionable.

- * Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.
- ** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).
- *** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.
- **** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

3. <u>WATER</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. *Discharge into surface water or any alteration of surface water quality including but not limited to temperature, dissolved oxygen or turbidity?		X				
b. Changes in drainage patterns or the rate and amount of surface runoff?		X				
c. Alteration of the course or magnitude of floodwater or other flows?		X				
d. Changes in the amount of surface water in any water body or creation of a new water body?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to water related hazards such as flooding?		X				
f. Changes in the quality of groundwater?		X				
g. Changes in the quantity of groundwater?		X				
h. Increase in risk of contamination of surface or groundwater?			X		No	3a
i. Effects on any existing water right or reservation?		X				
j. Effects on other water users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quality?			X		Yes	3b
k. Effects on other users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quantity?		X				
l. ****For P-R/D-J, will the project affect a designated floodplain? (Also see 3c.)		X				
m. ***For P-R/D-J, will the project result in any discharge that will affect federal or state water quality regulations? (Also see 3a.)		X				
n. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Water Resources (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

3a and 3b. Presence of cattle grazing in/around riparian zones such as creek bottoms may result in some localized water quality concerns. At least during the grazing period, water users may need to take added caution in drinking water before the water is purified. However, water users should ideally be taking the necessary precautions anyway due to the existing potential of naturally occurring water based pathogens (i.e., Giardia).

* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

*** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

**** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

4. <u>VEGETATION</u> Will the proposed action result in?	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Changes in the diversity, productivity or abundance of plant species (including trees, shrubs, grass, crops, and aquatic plants)?			X		No	4a
b. Alteration of a plant community?			X		No	4b
c. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
d. Reduction in acreage or productivity of any agricultural land?		X				
e. Establishment or spread of noxious weeds?		X			Yes	4e
f. **** <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will the project affect wetlands, or prime and unique farmland?		X				
g. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Vegetation (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

4a/b. The grazing system is designed to benefit wildlife by maintaining grass structure and palatability on the WMA. Some intended loss in grass biomass will occur as a result of grazing treatments. The current stocking rates have resulted in maintaining more residual grass cover, especially in the north pasture. Browse species impacts will also occur, however overall impacts are intended to be minimal long-term. Seasonal deferment and yearlong rest also provide habitats free of grazing over time. Further review and analysis of alternative grazing system options to improve the intentions of this Action will occur over the lease period.

4e. Currently, there are established clusters of spotted knapweed, houndstongue, and leafy spurge on some of the acreage included within the grazing plan. The grazing system is intended to enhance native plant productivity, which helps reduce weed infestations. The timing of early grazing coincides with the palatability of emerging weeds, which may also help reduce their vigor. In addition, FWP will continue to manage existing noxious weed infestations on its properties per the guidance of the FWP Integrated Noxious Weeds Management Plan.

* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

*** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

**** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

** 5. FISH/WILDLIFE Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Deterioration of critical fish or wildlife habitat?		X				
b. Changes in the diversity or abundance of game animals or bird species?			X		No	5b
c. Changes in the diversity or abundance of nongame species?		X				
d. Introduction of new species into an area?		X				
e. Creation of a barrier to the migration or movement of animals?			X		Yes	5e
f. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
g. Increase in conditions that stress wildlife populations or limit abundance (including harassment, legal or illegal harvest or other human activity)?			X		No	5g
h. ****For P-R/D-J, will the project be performed in any area in which T&E species are present, and will the project affect any T&E species or their habitat? (Also see 5f.)			X		No	5h
i. ***For P-R/D-J, will the project introduce or export any species not presently or historically occurring in the receiving location? (Also see 5d.)		X				
j. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Fish and Wildlife:

5b. The grazing system anticipates overall maintenance of the quality habitat for wildlife.

5e. Perimeter and interior fences are already established for this pasture system. To mitigate their impact, wildlife friendly fence designs have been employed so that wildlife can either pass above or below barbed wire strands.

5g. Some resident game and nongame species, to include mule deer, black and grizzly bear, elk, mountain grouse, small mammals and nongame birds could be affected by cattle presence and congestion for a limited time. These species may avoid the heavy use areas, but should return to the area when cattle presence is diminished.

5h. Grizzly and black bears are present on and around the WMA during the spring, summer, and fall periods. Bear presence is recognized by the cooperating landowners involved with these proposed actions. Livestock distribution is monitored and assessed to avoid direct conflict with these bears. In the event a conflict occurs, all measures will be made to favor the continued presence of bears on the WMA.

* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

*** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

**** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

B. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

6. <u>NOISE/ELECTRICAL EFFECTS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Increases in existing noise levels?		X				
b. Exposure of people to serve or nuisance noise levels?		X				
c. Creation of electrostatic or electromagnetic effects that could be detrimental to human health or property?		X				
d. Interference with radio or television reception and operation?		X				
e. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Noise/Electrical Effects (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

- * Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.
- ** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).
- *** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.
- **** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

7. <u>LAND USE</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of or interference with the productivity or profitability of the existing land use of an area?		X				7a
b. Conflicted with a designated natural area or area of unusual scientific or educational importance?		X				
c. Conflict with any existing land use whose presence would constrain or potentially prohibit the proposed action?		X				7c
d. Adverse effects on or relocation of residences?		X				
e. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Land Use (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

7a/c. Grazing activity would occur outside the time frame of pertinent big game or game bird hunting seasons that could be associated with this habitat.

- * Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.
- ** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).
- *** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.
- **** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

8. <u>RISK/HEALTH HAZARDS</u>	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Risk of an explosion or release of hazardous substances (including, but not limited to oil, pesticides, chemicals, or radiation) in the event of an accident or other forms of disruption?		X				
b. Affect an existing emergency response or emergency evacuation plan, or create a need for a new plan?		X				
c. Creation of any human health hazard or potential hazard?			X			8c
d. *** <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will any chemical toxicants be used? (Also see 8a)		X				
e. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Risk/Health Hazards (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

8c. Chemical spraying is part of FWP's integrated weed management program to manage noxious weeds. Certified professionals will utilize permitted chemicals in accordance with product labels and as provided for under state law.

* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

*** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

**** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

9. <u>COMMUNITY IMPACT</u>	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Alteration of the location, distribution, density, or growth rate of the human population of an area?		X				
b. Alteration of the social structure of a community?		X				
c. Alteration of the level or distribution of employment or community or personal income?		X				
d. Changes in industrial or commercial activity?		X				
e. Increased traffic hazards or effects on existing transportation facilities or patterns of movement of people and goods?		X				
f. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Community Impact (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

- * Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.
- ** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).
- *** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.
- **** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

10. <u>PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES</u>	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Will the proposed action have an effect upon or result in a need for new or altered governmental services in any of the following areas: fire or police protection, schools, parks/recreational facilities, roads or other public maintenance, water supply, sewer or septic systems, solid waste disposal, health, or other governmental services? If any, specify:		X				
b. Will the proposed action have an effect upon the local or state tax base and revenues?		X				
c. Will the proposed action result in a need for new facilities or substantial alterations of any of the following utilities: electric power, natural gas, other fuel supply or distribution systems, or communications?		X				
d. Will the proposed action result in increased use of any energy source?		X				
e. **Define projected revenue sources			X			10e
f. **Define projected maintenance costs.			X			10f
g. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Public Services/Taxes/Utilities (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

10e. The FWP standard grazing rate (cost/animal unit month) is based on the average annual grazing fees for Montana as reported by the National Agricultural Statistics Service in their annual report. The exact amount would depend upon the number of AUM's grazed X the annual grazing rate. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will be paid at the standard rate through each lessee (minus reimbursement to lessee for fence maintenance).

10f. Fish, Wildlife & Parks anticipates minimal maintenance costs for existing fences. Any future maintenance costs would be absorbed into the regular operation and maintenance accounts for the WMA.

* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

*** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

**** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

** 11. AESTHETICS/RECREATION Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of any scenic vista or creation of an aesthetically offensive site or effect that is open to public view?			X		No	11a
b. Alteration of the aesthetic character of a community or neighborhood?		X				
c. **Alteration of the quality or quantity of recreational/tourism opportunities and settings? (Attach Tourism Report.)		X				
d. *** <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will any designated or proposed wild or scenic rivers, trails or wilderness areas be impacted? (Also see 11a, 11c.)		X				
e. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Aesthetics/Recreation (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

11a. Historically, these pastures have been grazed by cattle. Cattle will be present for short periods of time each of the two successive years this agreement is proposed to be in place. The WMA is located in a rural setting and the presence of cattle will not be something new for the public. Public presence on the WMA during the grazing periods will be allowed. The grazing plan is designed so that no cattle will be present on the WMA after the beginning of September so there are no concerns related to hunter activity and cattle presence.

* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

*** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

**** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

12. <u>CULTURAL/HISTORICAL RESOURCES</u>	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. **Destruction or alteration of any site, structure or object of prehistoric historic, or paleontological importance?		X				12a-d
b. Physical change that would affect unique cultural values?		X				12a-d
c. Effects on existing religious or sacred uses of a site or area?		X				12a-d
d. **** <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will the project affect historic or cultural resources? Attach SHPO letter of clearance. (Also see 12.a.)		X				12a-d
e. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Cultural/Historical Resources (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

12a-d. FWP believes the proposed action would not have significant impact to any potential cultural or historic resources. Native large mammal grazing (mule and white-tailed deer, elk, bighorn sheep, presumably bison) has consistently occurred before and in concurrence (except bison) with more recent livestock presence. Fish, Wildlife and Parks has been using grazing on the WMA in a manner that is sustainable to the native vegetation and does not provide substantial impacts to wildlife, soils or water. The proposed action does not involve any new construction, excavation, or other ground disturbance and therefore does not impact any existing potential cultural resources.

Renewing a grazing lease such as is described (does not involve any substantial ground disturbance) does not require a cultural resource review. In consultation with SHPO, FWP has adopted rules under MCA 22-3-424 (1) for the "preservation of heritage properties and paleontological remains on lands owned by the state to avoid, whenever feasible, state actions or state assisted or licensed actions that substantially alter heritage properties or paleontological remains on lands owned by the state and avoid, whenever feasible, state actions or state assisted or licensed actions that substantially alter the properties..." FWP's cultural resource policy, ARM 12.8.503, requires that the department initiate "reviews and studies required by this part prior to initiating any undertaking which may result in changes to the surface structures, or other character of the land." A grazing lease or grazing in general does not substantially alter heritage properties (MCA) nor does it change surface structures or the character of the land (ARM). We also believe in terms of other cultural concerns, our leasing activities on Ear Mountain WMA do not have a significant negative impact on the land (e.g., we are not restricting public uses of the property, be they recreation or cultural).

According to the *EA Report for Development on the Ear Mountain Game Range (MT FWP, project number: W-124-D)* when the WMA was initially purchased in 1976, "No historic sites are known to exist on the property. Archeological sites may be present in light of the use of the Rocky Mountain foot hills as a hunting ground by native Americans, however to date no sites have been located."

* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

*** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

**** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

13. <u>SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE</u> Will the proposed action, considered as a whole:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable? (A project or program may result in impacts on two or more separate resources that create a significant effect when considered together or in total.)		X				
b. Involve potential risks or adverse effects, which are uncertain but extremely hazardous if they were to occur?		X				
c. Potentially conflict with the substantive requirements of any local, state, or federal law, regulation, standard or formal plan?		X				
d. Establish a precedent or likelihood that future actions with significant environmental impacts will be proposed?		X				
e. Generate substantial debate or controversy about the nature of the impacts that would be created?		X				
f. *** <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , is the project expected to have organized opposition or generate substantial public controversy? (Also see 13e.)		X				
g. **** <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , list any federal or state permits required.		X				

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Significance Criteria (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

The proposed project would not conflict with any local, state, or federal regulations. Furthermore, no substantial controversy or public debate is expected by continuation of the grazing plan since no adverse effects are anticipated and the grazing would generally benefit local wildlife populations and their habitat.

* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

*** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

**** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

2. Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency:

Two separate grazing lease agreements signed by each party would be the guiding documents for the duration of the grazing plan on the WMA. The agreements would be valid for two years. Fish, Wildlife and Parks would continue to monitor vegetative quality and quantity on both pastures throughout this time period. Additional discussion and communication (internally and externally) would also occur with respect to reviewing options for improvements in future grazing system plans that will benefit the WMA. At the end of the 2-year period a decision would be made on how to move forward with respect to future Ear Mtn. WMA grazing plans.

PART III. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT

The proposed grazing management plan between FWP and the Salmond and Gollehon Ranches would support maintaining productive habitat conditions on Ear Mtn. WMA. Livestock would be used in a limited 2-year rest-rotation grazing system to maintain and/or improve vegetative conditions for wildlife.

The components of this project would not have significant impacts on the physical environment (i.e. geological features, fish and wildlife, and water resources) or the human environment (i.e. land use, recreation, and utilities). Most impacts identified in the previous pages are minor and would be of short duration. As previously discussed, anticipated long-term consequences from the implementation of past, current and potential future grazing plans would be to maintain forage and cover conditions for wildlife.

PART IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

1. Public Involvement:

The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on this EA, the proposed action and alternative:

- Public notice in each of these newspapers: *Choteau Acantha*, *Fairfield Sun Times*, and *the Great Falls Tribune*.
- One statewide press release;
- Direct mailing or email notification to landowners and interested parties (individuals, groups, agencies).
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov> where comments can be submitted.

Copies of this draft environmental assessment may be obtained by mail from Region 4 FWP at 4600 Giant Springs Road, Great Falls, 59405; by phoning 406-467-2488; by emailing blonner@mt.gov; or by viewing FWP's website - <http://fwp.mt.gov/home/publicComments.html>

This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope having limited impacts, many of which can be mitigated.

2. Duration of comment period:

Comments may be made online on the EA's webpage or may be directed by mail to the FWP address above or by email to blonner@mt.gov. Comments must be received by FWP no later than 5:00 pm on September 13, 2017.

Given the local focus and relative simplicity of the proposed action, a minimum 21-day public comment period and subsequent Commission action are appropriate.

PART V. EA PREPARATION

- 1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? (YES/NO)? No. If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action.**

Based upon the above assessment, which has identified a limited number of minor impacts from the proposed action, it has been determined that no significant impacts to the physical and human environment would result due to the proposed action alternative. It has also been determined that no significant public controversy would incur over the proposed action alternative. Therefore, an EIS is not required and an environmental assessment is the appropriate level of review.

- 2. Name, title, address and phone number of the person(s) responsible for preparing the EA:**

Brent Lonner, FWP Wildlife Biologist
PO Box 488
Fairfield, MT 59436
406-467-2488

- 3. List of agencies consulted during preparation of the EA:**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks: Wildlife Division

Literature Cited:

Frisina, M.R. and Q. Kujala. 1999. South pasture-Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area livestock grazing analysis. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Helena, MT.

Frisina, M.R. and Q. Kujala. 2001. North pasture-Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area livestock grazing analysis. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Helena, MT.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. 1995. Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area grazing lease No. 4073. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Region 4, Great Falls; 9 pages.

APPENDIX A

South Pasture Grazing Plan

For the 2018 grazing season, the south pasture (Figure 1) shall be open to not more than 391 AUMs from June 1, 2018 through June 30, 2018. Only cattle may be grazed on this pasture. Fence maintenance prior to cattle entry and while cattle are present will be the responsibility of the lessee. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will provide necessary materials for maintenance. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will pay lessees at the hourly rate of \$10.00 for time spent on fence maintenance. Salt or mineral is the responsibility of the lessee at approved sites. The grazing rate (cost/AUM) will be based upon the average annual grazing fees for Montana as reported by the National Agriculture Statistics Service in their annual report. A single annual payment shall be made to the Department no later than November 1, 2018. The total cost of maintenance through each lessee (number of hours worked times hourly rate) will be subtracted from the payment. The lessee will need to provide written documentation of maintenance performed to include date(s), hours worked, work description and location. Fence maintenance costs (hours worked) through the lessee will not exceed \$500.00.

For the 2019 grazing season, the south pasture (Figure 1) shall be open to not more than 391 AUMs from August 1, 2019 through August 31, 2019. Only cattle may be grazed on this pasture. Fence maintenance prior to cattle entry and while cattle are present will be the responsibility of the lessee. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will provide necessary materials for maintenance. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will pay lessees at the hourly rate of \$10.00 for time spent on fence maintenance. Salt or mineral is the responsibility of the lessee at approved sites. The grazing rate (cost/AUM) will be based upon the average annual grazing fees for Montana as reported by the National Agriculture Statistics Service in their annual report. A single annual payment shall be made to the Department no later than November 1, 2019. The total cost of maintenance through each lessee (number of hours worked times hourly rate) will be subtracted from the payment. The lessee will need to provide written documentation of maintenance performed to include date(s), hours worked, work description and location. Fence maintenance costs (hours worked) through the lessee will not exceed \$500.00.

Browse and herbaceous forage conditions will be assessed during and after the 2018 and 2019 grazing seasons. Any adjustments to the grazing prescription will be made at that time along with the option of renewing a new grazing lease agreement.

These grazing schemes (for the years 2018 and 2019) conform to conclusions and prescriptions in the March 1999 "South Pasture-Ear Mountain WMA Livestock Grazing Analysis" by Frisina and Kujala.

APPENDIX B

North Pasture Grazing Plan

For the 2018 grazing season, the north pasture (Figure 1) shall be open to not more than 70 AUMs from August 1, 2018 through August 31, 2018. Only cattle may be grazed on this pasture. Fence maintenance prior to cattle entry and while cattle are present will be the responsibility of the lessee. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will provide necessary materials for maintenance. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will pay lessees at the hourly rate of \$10.00 for time spent on fence maintenance. Salt or mineral is the responsibility of the lessee at approved sites. The grazing rate (cost/AUM) will be based upon the average annual grazing fees for Montana as reported by the National Agricultural Statistics Service in their annual report. A single annual payment shall be made to the Department no later than November 1, 2018. The total cost of maintenance through each lessee (number of hours worked times hourly rate) will be subtracted from the payment. The lessee will need to provide written documentation of maintenance performed to include date(s), hours worked, work description and location. Fence maintenance costs (hours worked) through the lessee will not exceed \$500.00.

For the 2019 grazing season and as part of the grazing pasture/rotation pattern, the north pasture (Figure 1) shall be rested and no grazing shall occur.

Browse and herbaceous forage conditions will be assessed during and after the 2018 grazing seasons. Any adjustments to the grazing prescription will be made at that time along with the option of renewing a new grazing lease agreement.

These grazing schemes (for the years 2018 and 2019) conform to conclusions and prescriptions in the July 2001 "North Pasture-Ear Mountain WMA Livestock Grazing Analysis" by Frisina and Kujala.

APPENDIX C

Photo point comparisons on Ear Mtn. WMA (1998 – 2017).



Spring, 1998

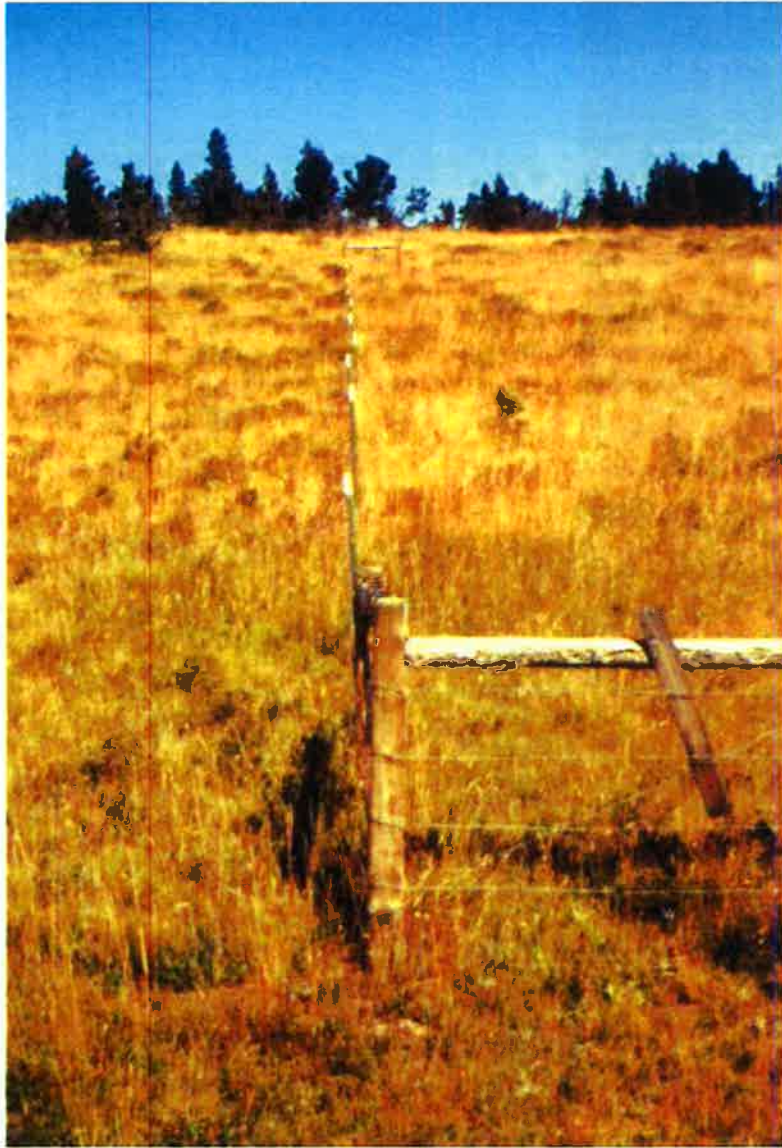
Aspen stand located in the South pasture. Some of the older, mature aspen trees have thinned out over time, although good aspen sucker productivity is occurring in the understory.



August, 2009



July, 2017



Summer, 1998



July, 2017

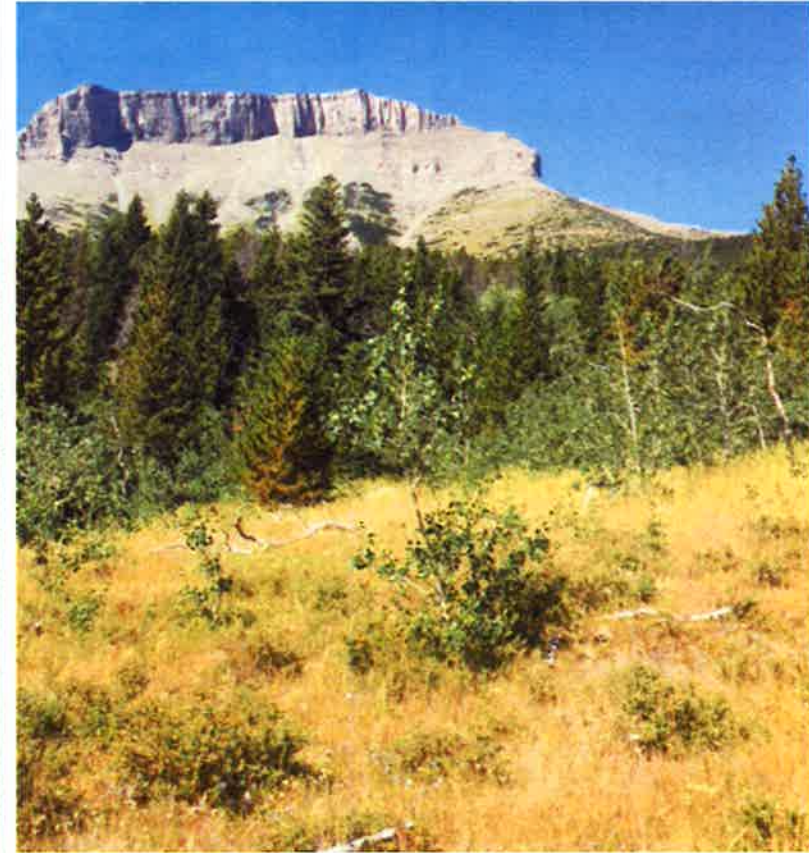
Vegetation exclosure in the south pasture. Perennial and annual plants are being maintained as is evident when comparing plant production from within and immediately outside the exclosure. The lone Douglas fir tree located within the exclosure (along with other tree species located outside, but in the immediate area) appears to have been impacted by a weather event earlier this year.



Spring, 1998



August, 2009



July, 2017

Aspen and conifer stand located in the South pasture. The dead douglass fir trees shown in the 2009 photo are due to beetle kill. Estimates of beetle killed trees on the WMA are approximately 10%. Aspen production in this immediate area has declined, but has also rebounded as shown in the photos. An adjacent stand of aspen located just to the right of the photo in 2017 (outside the frame) is demonstrating positive young growth of trees.



Photo from within the North pasture (looking north). An example of heavy amounts of residual grass present in certain locations within the pasture.
Photo taken July, 2017.

